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Sony Personal Navigation System nav-u

REVIEW DATE: 04.19.06

Editor's Rating: ●●●○○

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By Craig Ellison

Editor's Note: (06/06/06) since we published this review, Sony cut the price to $499.

When you think of major players in the portable GPS navigation market, Sony doesn't come to mind. Sony is hoping to change that perception with the introduction of its nav-u Portable Satellite Navigation System.

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The nav-u features a 3.5-inch (diagonal) touch screen with a special coating to make it both glare- and fingerprint-resistant. It has a built-in light sensor to adjust the screen automatically for optimal viewing in any lighting condition and includes both a day and night mode. Even in bright sunlight, I found the screen easy to read.

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Installation and setup, as with most portable GPS devices, is quite simple. The nav-u arrives pre-loaded with Navteq's street-level maps for the 48 contiguous states (excluding Alaska and Hawaii) and a respectable database of 1.6 million POI (Points of Interest). All this information fits into 1GB of solid state memory. The nav-u mounts to the windshield with a suction cup or to a supplied plate that you can mount with screws. The mounting bracket is one of the better brackets I've seen; it's sturdy and

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easy to adjust. The bracket has a set of contacts that mate to contacts on the bottom of the nav-u, making it easy to snap the device in and out of the bracket. You can connect both power and an optional GPS antenna to the bracket, and not have to fumble with cables each time you snap the nav-u into or out of the bracket.

The nav-u is fairly straightforward to operate. It has only two hardware buttons: Power on/off, and a button that makes the device speak the last command. All of the other input is done via the touch screen. Upon boot-up, after the unit has acquired enough satellites for navigation, the first screen you see is the map screen. Across the top of the screen are three icons: one for hiding or showing all other icons, one to toggle between north up or track up, and one for Select Destination. Also along the top line of the screen are a battery-status indicator and a GPS indicator that shows whether you have enough satellites for navigation. A tap of the GPS icon shows your current latitude and longitude and the number of active satellites, and it lets you save the current position as a favorite. The bottom strip of the screen displays current compass direction, current street, time of day, and your current speed.

The interface is also fairly simple. A tap anywhere on the map screen brings up the main menu, which has icons for New Destination, Search Nearby, Route, Muting, and Settings. There's also a convenient Back Arrow icon that takes you back one level, and an Up Arrow icon that takes you directly back to the main map view.

Like most GPS devices, the nav-u lets you choose either 2D track up, 2D north up, or a 3D view. Its auto-zoom feature, available in both 2D and 3D views, automatically scales the map resolution based on your current speed. Unfortunately, most likely in a nod to simplicity, neither the main map view nor the navigation screen let you zoom in or out. Only the Select Destination screen, one that's not used for navigating, lets the user choose the zoom level.

The Settings icon lets you set your preferences or to view information about the unit. You can set volume, map view preferences, routing options, screen preferences, and more. The nav-u supports multiple speed profiles (slow, standard, and fast) for a car, motorcycle, truck, bike, and pedestrian. You can also choose the shortest or fastest route and set your preference (Yes/No) for interstates, tollways, and ferries.

New Destination lets you set your next route. You can choose from Address, Point of Interest, Select on Map, your saved favorites, or recent destinations. You can select an individual state or all states. If you choose to navigate to a POI, you can then find one near your current location, nationwide, or in a specified city. Finally, you can select either Any or limit your search to one of 11 categories: Gas Station, Restaurant, Accommodation, Entertainment, Shopping, Public Transport, Bank, School and Education, Civil Service, Health Care, and Enterprises.

Once you select a category, a screen pops up with your choice populated in the Category 1 field. Category 2 is actually a subcategory within the Category 1. The third choice is an icon that says "Please select." When you press "Please select," an alphabetic keyboard pops up on the screen that lets you type in the name of the POI. Or you can select List, which brings up a screen that has a large box containing the first choice on the list. You can scroll down the list using the Up/Down arrows until your choice appears in the large box, then touch the screen to make your selection. Once you've done so, you're returned to the previous page, where you can see the POI on the map, save the POI, or start navigation. Although you can generally find what you're looking for, this menu system is awkward compared with others I've tested.

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In navigation mode, the nav-u displays an impressive amount of information. Both your current street and the street for your next maneuver are shown on the bottom of the screen. On the left, a graphic indicates the direction of your next turn, along with a "shrinking thermometer" that shows your relative distance to the turn. If two maneuvers are to be executed quickly in sequence, a second directional arrow shows the second turn. Your current heading, speed, altitude, miles to destination, and estimated time of arrival are also displayed. The nav-u supports multiple-destination routing, so if you have a second stage planned, miles to destination and ETA are to the next stage point. While you can display your planned route on the map, I'm disappointed that the nav-u lacks a List view that shows a list of your turns and the mileage to each. Most GPS devices have List views.

I road-tested the nav-u on our standard route and found no surprises. It generated the same route (with the same preferences specified) as did competing GPS devices that also use Navteq's mapping database, such as any of the Garmin units. Directions were spoken clearly and at appropriate times, such as "in 600 feet, turn right." Like its competitors, such as the Lowrance iWAY 350C, the Cobra Nav One 4500, and Garmin StreetPilot c330, the nav-u doesn't support text-to-speech conversion. The data on the navigation screen gave me confidence that I wouldn't miss a turn.

The nav-u has a list price of $599.99, which puts it squarely between some of its competitors' 3.5-inch screen GPS devices: the iWAY 350C, at $499, and the StreetPilot c330, at $699. Although the nav-u is fairly easy to use and has many features to recommend it, the Lowrance iWAY 350C is a better value.

Compare the GPS devices mentioned above side by side

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